

Maryland Task Force on the Principalship

Clearing the Plate Workgroup

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Maryland State Board of Education
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**MARYLAND TASK FORCE ON THE PRINCIPALSHIP:
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Executive Summary

Recommendations for MSDE

1. Establish an internal committee that meets regularly to review and approve survey instruments and requests for information sent to principals.
2. Establish a calendar/timeline of approved surveys and requests for information so that principals are not deluged with such requests at the same time, particularly busy times of the school year.
3. Review and streamline all special education paperwork and meeting requirements to assure that schools are not burdened with any unnecessary requirements not based in federal or state law.
4. Publish information for schools on a timely basis that allows for thoughtful consideration of requests/information.
5. Offer workshops to assist principals in analyzing MSPP and other standardized test data.
6. Recommend to local school systems a ratio of one assistant principal for each 350 students.
7. Maintain and publish an updated listing of all school support services.

Recommendations for Local School Systems

1. Provide an assistant principal for each 350 students.
2. Provide full-time Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) team managers for each school.
3. Redesign the timeframe in which principals are required to formally evaluate staff.
4. Review and adhere to an established clerical and certificated staffing ratio.
5. Provide business managers for all schools.
6. Assure appropriate levels of security personnel in all middle and high schools.
7. Provide an appropriate ratio of school psychologists and alternate education personnel.
8. Provide appropriate staffing to monitor buses, cafeteria, athletic events, and extracurricular activities.
9. Provide the necessary staffing to monitor breakfast programs, after-school programs, and summer programs.

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Introduction

“Over the last decade, more and more responsibilities have been ‘heaped on the shoulders of principals...’ The job, as it is currently designed, places so much emphasis on operations and management, there is very little time for academics. The primary role of the principal is working on pursuing student achievement.”

Vincent Ferrandino

Executive Director, National Association of Elementary School Principals

In support of the principal’s role as instructional leader, both the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and the Local School System (LSS) must do all they can to eliminate managerial responsibilities from the principalship. According to Cathy Mineberg, Houston Public School System’s Chief of Staff – “Right now, some school principals spend over half their time on non-instructional issues.”

The workgroup believes that clearing the plate of non-instructional duties and determining priorities for other duties will make the principalship more attractive for aspiring administrators. According to Michael Carr of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, “Principals have traditionally come from the ranks of teachers, but a lot more teachers are deciding not to go into the principalship because of the wide range of duties that they would have to take on.”

Workgroup members agree that state and local funding must be provided to local school systems so that they can implement the strategies listed in this report. In the same manner in which the governor gave funding for teacher salaries during the 2000-01 school year, the committee urges MSDE to seek legislative funding for LSSs to implement the appropriate recommendations below in order to attract and retain principals. Likewise, local school systems must also recognize that lack of funding, particularly for staffing, is a major disincentive for qualified candidates to even seek a principalship.

The Charge for the Workgroup

The charge of the workgroup was to identify principals’ duties and responsibilities determined to be discretionary, unnecessary, unproductive, and/or of low priority and to suggest appropriate staffing levels that would allow principals to do their jobs.

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The Goal

The goal of the workgroup was to identify duties and responsibilities required of principals as a result of Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) expectations which can be removed from the principal's plate, items that MSDE can add to enhance the principalship, and items the local school systems can implement to enhance the principalship. It is hoped as a result of this report that local school systems would also engage in a local "clearing the plate" initiative since much of the paperwork and meeting burden that falls on principals is local in nature.

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Recommendations for MSDE

- 1. Establish an internal committee that meets regularly to review and approve survey instruments and requests for information sent to principals.**

Discussion:

Local building level principals feel that a coordinated effort at the Maryland State Department of Education to limit the amount of information requested from principals could be a big help in clearing the plate. It appears to principals that various divisions at MSDE, with all good intentions, request information that they feel they need, but the cumulative result is unnecessary paperwork at the building level. Even requests that go to others in a school system (e.g., assistant superintendents) frequently find their way to the principal's desk. And sometimes this burden comes at an extraordinarily difficult time of the school year. Principals understand that certain kinds of information are necessary to submit to MSDE, and they wish to comply in a timely and quality manner. However, their ability to do so would be greatly enhanced if they only received requests that are absolutely necessary. In order to accomplish that task, the workgroup feels that an internal committee at MSDE should be established to review all requests for information coming out of MSDE. Without the approval of that committee, principals should not be required to comply with such requests.

- 2. Establish a calendar/timeline of approved surveys and requests for information so that principals are not deluged with such requests at the same time, particularly busy times of the school year.**

Discussion:

In addition to the review of various kinds of requests for information coming out of MSDE, the workgroup also feels that a calendar ought to be established to assure that multiple requests do not fall on the shoulders of principals at the same time. Requests should be staggered, and critical times of the school year should be avoided to the extent possible.

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- 3. Review and streamline all special education paperwork and meeting requirements to assure that schools are not burdened with any unnecessary requirements not based in federal or state law.**

Discussion:

Principals understand that there are a variety of federal and state reporting and meeting requirements that go along with special education. However, they want to make absolutely certain that they are not burdened with unnecessary requirements. In that regard, the workgroup recommends that the Division of Special Education at MSDE evaluate all of its own meeting and paperwork requirements and eliminate any that are not absolutely required by law. If possible, principals would also hope that the Division of Special Education at MSDE would look at alternative sources of data already requested of schools to determine whether such data requests are being duplicated and thus could be eliminated in order to further reduce the paperwork burden. Additionally, the workgroup would like to see MSDE be proactive politically with appropriate state and federal politicians to reduce the burden in this regard. Suffice it to say that special education issues and demands take an enormous amount of time out of the schedules of many people, including the principal.

- 4. Publish information for schools on a timely basis that allows for thoughtful consideration of requests/information.**

Discussion:

All too frequently when notices or requests for information reach the principal's desk, the timeframe within which a response is requested puts enormous strain on the ability of the principals to get it done in a quality manner. Principals should not be expected to respond quickly to a request that results from poor planning on the sender's part. It should be noted that some of the problem may be an internal communications problem in larger school districts where requests take time to filter their way through the system. However, that too points out the need to make certain that requests are sent to local school systems with sufficient lead time so that they can make their way through appropriate channels and still give the principal time to adequately fulfill the request. All MSDE personnel should be given direction on how far in advance the acceptable standard is for mailing such notices or requests. Schools must live by standards. MSDE should likewise.

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- 5. Offer workshops to assist principals in analyzing MSPP and other standardized test data.**

Discussion:

If principals are truly to become instructional leaders, they must possess the necessary skills to analyze school data. Many principals already have considerable expertise in this regard, but as the turnover among the ranks continues, there will be much additional training needed. Principals who have this skill will save a great deal of time in planning for and implementing successful strategies leading to school improvement.

- 6. Recommend to local school systems a ratio of one assistant principal for no more than 350 students.**

Discussion:

The workgroup recognizes that staffing is largely a local responsibility. However, many local jurisdictions either do not have the necessary resources or formal guidelines for providing assistant principals. Additionally, they do not always follow the guidelines that are in place. The workgroup believes that MSDE can be proactive in this regard by recommending a ratio of no more than one assistant principal for each 350 students. MSDE should also seek supplemental staffing from the legislature to help local jurisdictions achieve these ratios. This recommendation is not intended to prevent local jurisdictions to lower this ratio. It is merely intended to set an upper limit if principals are to have the kind of support staffing they need to become instructional leaders in their schools.

- 7. Maintain and publish an updated listing of all school support services.**

Discussion:

It was the feeling of the workgroup that MSDE has a large number of support services of which local building principals are not aware. As MSDE continues to expand its technical assistance services, the workgroup feels that there needs to be a proactive publishing and maintaining of those and other support services, with names, addresses, telephone numbers, and a specific description of the services provided. These should be published electronically as well as in hard copy. Part of the problem for principals in terms of saving much needed time is the ability to find resources in a timely manner. Such a listing would go a long way in that regard.

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Recommendations for Local School Systems

- 1. Provide an assistant principal for each 350 students.**

Discussion:

The workgroup recognizes that local school system budgets are already stretched. However, if we do not provide the appropriate staffing to support the principal, he/she will find it impossible to be an instructional leader. The minimum number of students that should result in an additional administrator at a school is 350.

- 2. Provide full-time Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) team managers for each school.**

Discussion:

The workgroup is very concerned about the requirements placed on schools as a result of the special education population. Full-time team managers, especially in schools with a significant special education population, are required if that job is to be done properly without tying up principals unnecessarily. If we do not possess the ability to change politically the requirements in this regard, we must recognize the extraordinary burden placed on principals. The only way to alleviate that burden is to provide appropriate levels of staffing to free up the principal from having to perform that function. Otherwise, the time that a principal has to be an instructional leader will continue to be significantly diminished.

- 3. Redesign the timeframe in which principals are required to formally evaluate staff.**

Discussion:

The workgroup recognizes in this as well as other recommendations that there are significant differences among local school districts. Hence, the level of specificity in some of the recommendations is somewhat limited. At the current time some jurisdictions already allow faculty to be rated formally on an every other year basis, with additional verbal evaluative feedback given throughout that time period. Such a practice, it seems to the workgroup, makes great sense in terms of freeing up valuable time for the principal. There are obviously many teachers who will perform admirably every year whether they are formally evaluated or not. On the other hand, there are some faculty who will need to be evaluated much more frequently. Not requiring an annual written evaluation of every staff member seems to be one good way of allowing principals to focus on greater needs.

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4. Review and adhere to an established clerical and certificated staffing ratio.

Discussion:

Local school systems have established ratios for staffing schools. These ratios are provided for clerical, custodial, and certificated staff. The workgroup feels that school systems should review these local ratios to make certain that they align with the stated need to clear the plate of principals. Where there is such alignment, the workgroup simply recommends that local school systems adhere to their own ratios, which is often not the case.

5. Provide business managers for all schools.

Discussion:

Much of the literature speaks of the amount of time that principals devote to managerial kinds of functions. The plain truth of the matter is that there is no alternative in many situations because the appropriate help is not available. If we are serious about principals becoming instructional leaders, they must have the managerial support necessary to allow that to happen. Someone in each school aside from the principal must perform the function of business manager. In large schools, this must be a full-time responsibility. In smaller schools, it may have to be a shared responsibility of other staff so that the principal can focus on student achievement.

6. Assure appropriate levels of security personnel in all middle and high schools.

Discussion:

Security in the upper grades is becoming an increasingly serious and time-consuming issue for principals. Crisis management fills up far too many days. Many of these crises involve violence or other violations of the law. Principals are not equipped, nor should we expect them to be, police officers. They need to be provided with security personnel who are expert at handling security and investigative issues. Once again, this is imperative if we are serious in wanting our principals to become instructional leaders. The ratio of such personnel to schools will likely depend on a number of factors (e.g., size, history of problems). But once again, the plain truth is that if principals must investigate, interrogate, charge, and testify, they will not be in classrooms working with teachers.

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- 7. Provide an appropriate ratio of school psychologists and alternate education personnel.**

Discussion:

This matter is similar to the previously mentioned staffing issues. If a school has a number of students who require special attention, the appropriate allocation of time for a school psychologist must exist. If a school has alternative programs (e.g., in-school suspension), those programs must be appropriately staffed. Every time the principal must deal with a non-instructional issue, there is a trade-off in terms of not being able to work with classroom instruction. Those instances need to be reduced wherever possible.

- 8. Provide appropriate staffing to monitor buses, cafeteria, athletic events, and extracurricular activities.**

Discussion:

It is puzzling to this workgroup how we can expect principals to be instructional leaders and then not provide the kind of assistance needed to perform even the most simple of tasks. The real value of the principal comes in his/her expertise in helping staff move in a direction that will increase student achievement, not in monitoring buses, the cafeteria, athletic events, and other extra-curricular activities. Although these are important aspects of any school, requiring the principal to spend an enormous amount of time in this regard reduces time the principal is able to spend in the classroom and in planning for instructional improvement. This workgroup questions the priorities of such an approach to staffing schools.

- 9. Provide the necessary staffing to monitor breakfast programs, after-school programs, and summer programs.**

Discussion:

As with previously mentioned staffing issues, requiring principals to monitor before and after school programs also takes an enormous amount of time away from a focus on the instructional program. The workgroup wishes to state as emphatically as possible that local school systems cannot continue to expect great achievement gains while not providing the kinds of assistance that principals need. It is evident that there is an alarming crisis in terms of qualified candidates wanting to move into the principalship. There are many reasons for that fact of life, but certainly one is that many of the outstanding teachers who could become excellent principals refuse to be put into such a no-win situation. And the principalship as it currently exists is far too often exactly that.

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Conclusion

The workgroup recognizes that many of the recommendations in this report require resources. Those resources may be state or local, or a combination of both. As stated in the introduction, MSDE can be of great assistance to local jurisdictions by securing appropriate funding from the governor and legislature to help with the many staffing issues facing local school systems. We are past the point of simply dismissing the need for increased staff simply because of a lack of funding. We have a crisis that will not go away, and our students will be the ultimate benefactors of our commitment. We suspect that many will argue that we cannot afford to implement the recommendations found in this report. We ask very simply – can we afford not to implement them?